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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 000629

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y -- (ADDING PORTION MARKING PARA 1)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ONE MONTH OUT

REF: A. ANKARA 588

[1](#)B. ANKARA 011

[1](#)C. 06 ANKARA 6427

[1](#)D. ANKARA 563

[1](#)E. ANKARA 610

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for
Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: With the presidential election process beginning in just four weeks, political circles are bursting with theories about what the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will do. For his part, Prime Minister Erdogan has stuck to his declared intention not to signal any decision on candidates until right before the election window opens on April 16. While Erdogan remains the most likely candidate, other names are rumored. Pressure against Erdogan's candidacy for this highly symbolic office stands to build in the coming weeks (refs A and B), but so far, can best be characterized as an "anyone but Erdogan" campaign. The military and other secular institutions believe an Erdogan presidency would upset the state's secular balance, and will challenge the government at every turn to reinforce their authority and make clear to Erdogan the difficult relationship he would face as president. Should Erdogan buck those who oppose him, he can anticipate challenges to his legitimacy both during the election process and after the parliamentary vote. If Erdogan chooses the more cautious route of remaining PM and putting forward a less controversial presidential candidate, he would lower the temperature and probably also bolster AKP's performance in the fall parliamentary elections. END SUMMARY.

New President by May 16

[1](#)2. (U) The presidential election process begins Monday, April 16, with the opening of the 10-day window for the registration of candidates. All candidates must be declared by midnight at the end of April 25. Parliament will then take up the issue pursuant to the following schedule:

May 1: First round (requires 367 votes to elect the president)

May 5: Second round (requires 367 votes to elect the president)
May 9: Third round (requires 276 votes to elect the president)
May 13: Fourth round (runoff between the top two contenders; requires 276 votes to elect the president)
May 16: New president is sworn in

Parliament will convene on the weekend as necessary to comply with this schedule. AKP holds 354 seats in parliament, suggesting that at the latest, the incoming president will be elected on May 9 in the third round of voting. Turkey's previous presidents have generally been elected in the third round. An opposition-backed plan (allegedly with TGS support) to scuttle the election by challenging the first round of voting for lack of quorum, based on a specious interpretation of the constitution, could hijack the process, if forced to a Constitutional Court ruling.

Erdogan Still Favored, But Possibilities Abound

13. (C) Prime Minister Erdogan is still the only obvious choice and is widely believed to have a keen desire to become president, despite the position's largely ceremonial role. Some contend that Erdogan's pugnacious, street-fighter personality will push him to go for the presidency, even if pragmatic political considerations would advise against it, if only to beat back opposition taunts that he lacks the courage to take on the job. Many also believe his wife is eager for him to accede to the highly symbolic office. Health concerns add to speculation that the presidency would be more comfortable for him; a herniated disk on March 12 reportedly forced him to cancel all his appointments through the weekend.

14. (C) The controversy surrounding Erdogan's presidential ambitions and possible reaction (refs A & B) has kept discussion of other candidates afloat. The opposition lacks the numbers to field a viable candidate. The successful candidate -- who will have to renounce party affiliation, at least officially -- will be determined and elected by the AKP. A recent poll of the AKP provincial organizations by the party leadership surveyed respondents' views on the candidacy of Defense Minister Vecdi Gonul, State Ministers Besir Atalay and Mehmet Aydin, and Justice Committee Chairman Koksali Toptan, possibly indicating the front-runners. Among our contacts, Gonul, Minister of State Mehmet Ali Sahin, and former Chief of the General Staff Hilmi Ozkok come up most frequently. The names of former Foreign Minister and Parliament Speaker Hikmet Cetin and retired Ambassador Kamran Inan surface periodically, both of whom are respected senior statesmen of Kurdish background. Parliamentary speaker Bulent Arinc is the only one who has promoted his own name, declaring that if Erdogan does not run, he will. Party members have downplayed Arinc's remarks to refute the implication that an Erdogan designee may face competition from within the party. Earlier rumours of a Gul candidacy have long since died out, although Gul remains Erdogan's undisputed successor as AKP leader and prime minister if the PM becomes president.

Entering the Hot Season

15. (C) The Turkish General Staff (TGS) remains concerned that an Erdogan presidency would upset the traditional secular balance of state and government in which the military and president have historically provided ballast to an erratic, often-changing parliament. Known for his direct, open communication style, Chief of Staff Buyukanit has been particularly pointed in his public criticism of AKP foreign policy in recent months (ref D). Most of our contacts believe the military will continue to use both public and private "diplomacy" to make its views known. In the month ahead, we expect the TGS to step up its public challenges to the government on the wide array of issues which the military

places in the "security" basket. We note, though, that Buyukanit's March 16 remarks to the War Academy in Istanbul were closed to the press and there have been no "leaks" since. In addition, contacts report a TGS black-out on meetings between diplomats and active and retired military officials during the election period.

¶6. (C) The National Security Council (NSC), originally scheduled to meet in the midst of the election process, has announced it will hold its meeting three weeks early, on April 9. Some observers speculate this move is designed to allow the generals to gauge Erdogan's intentions before candidacies are announced; others see an opportunity to put the most direct pressure on the prime minister yet not to pursue the presidency.

Business and Markets Price in Erdogan Candidacy

¶7. (C) Business leaders and financial market investors, having analyzed the different scenarios for months, have assigned a significant probability to an Erdogan candidacy, although many would prefer a consensus candidate. In recent months both analysts and the business community seem to have concluded that even if Erdogan goes for the presidency, life will go on. For example, in a softening of the organization's previous position, the Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's (TUSIAD) new chairperson, Arzuhan Yalcindag, stated that the President should be a person who embraces all sectors of society but acknowledged that the president will be selected by the democratically-elected parliament. TUSIAD's previous leadership had encouraged the AKP to find a social consensus on potential candidates and avoid political tension. Turkey's financial sector seems to have already factored in volatility relating to the presidential elections.

¶8. (C) Business people and investors show more concern about the fall parliamentary election, particularly if Erdogan weakens his party's chances by moving to the presidency. The worst scenario for markets and the business community is a coalition government, on the theory that such a government, like its 1990's precursors, would lack the political will and accountability to push through controversial economic reforms. Some financial analysts speculate that if AKP fails to garner enough votes to form a government without going into coalition, it will opt to sit out for a year or so while a multi-party left-right coalition dithers, then expect to benefit from an electoral rebound when the coalition government (inevitably) falls apart. More broadly, the business community worries about the spillover from rising nationalism to political stability and economic policy (ref E).

Comment

¶9. (C) Erdogan himself recently stated that surprises may emerge in the presidential election. Whatever candidate AKP puts forward, members of parliament mindful of their position on the party lists in the upcoming general elections -- in which AKP seems set to lose seats, even if it comes in first place -- are likely to be easily steered by party leaders. The presidential election outcome will clarify the conditions for the general elections, currently scheduled for November ¶4. The pressure on Erdogan ultimately shapes the terms of this presidential election: Erdogan must choose whether to defy pressure and take on his opponents, or ease tensions in society by proposing a compromise candidate. The establishment -- particularly the TGS -- must calculate the risk to its credibility with the public if it continues to be seen as putting pressure on the (civilian) presidential election process. The upcoming NSC meeting and public protests scheduled for April 8 and 15 in Ankara will provide openings for a last-minute squeeze on Erdogan. However, the business and financial community has clearly factored an

Erdogan presidency into its decision making process and does not appear overly alarmed by the prospect. Lacking the votes and a political platform that extends beyond slamming the AKP, the opposition has relegated itself to the sidelines. It's Erdogan's move. END COMMENT.

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